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Southern Attitudes Towards Europe during the Civil War

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SOUTHERN ATTITUDES TOWARDS EUROPE DURING THE CIVIL WAR

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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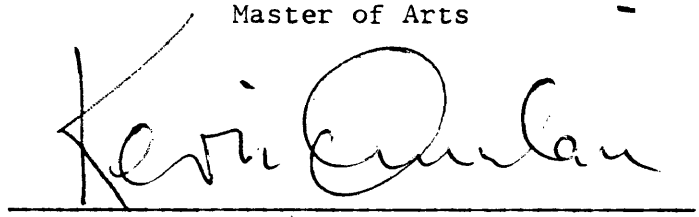

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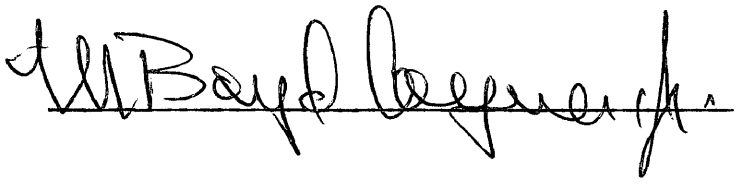

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The writer wishes to express his thanks to Professor Boyd Coyner for the special patience and attention to detail required of the long-distance supervisor.

ABSTRACT

This study has tried to clarify Confederate popular attitudes towards England and, to the extent she impinged on the subject, to France.

Since the major source of information by far was the newspaper press, an attempt has been made, at the outset, to argue for the significance of local newspapers as legitimate voices of popular opinion. The hypothesis is that local papers simultaneously influenced and were influenced by the communities they served.

The study is divided into three parts. The first looks at the major issues: The English declaration of neutrality, the Northern blockade, and the question of European recognition. The second traces the movement of attitudes from high optimism in the prospect of European intervention, through doubt, and then to the loss of hope. The third part examines the influence of "King Cotton" and the shift of attention from England as a potential ally to France.

INTRODUCTION

I share M.E. Massey's admiration for Frank Owsley's King Cotton Diplomacy, but also the view that Owsley failed to stress "the people's views, hopes, and disappointments."[1] By researching the local newspapers from which the ordinary people presumably derived much of their information I hope that the emphasis will be on popular attitudes.

Eight newspapers were used for this study and they were selected on the basis of the following criteria: that they were available locally in reasonably continuous runs; that they had good circulations; and that they represented a wide geographical and social range.

Three of the papers were published in Richmond, Virginia: the Examiner, Enquirer, and Whig. This preponderance reflects the importance of the city as a centre of politics and communications; New Orleans is represented by the New Orleans Bee and Alabama by the Mobile Register and Advertiser. Georgia's powerful cotton culture is represented by the Macon Daily Telegraph, the Columbus Daily Enquirer, and the Weekly Columbus Enquirer.

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[1] Arthur S. Link and Rembert W. Patrick, eds., Writing Southern History: Essays in Historiography in Honor of F.M. Green (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1965) p.260.

The vast majority of citations in this thesis are for newspapers published during the first two years of the war. This is partly because, as I discuss later, the number of papers diminished greatly due to a shortage of materials, a disruption of communications, and closure following invasion. It also reflects, however, the level of Southern interest in Europe. This interest did not neatly follow either good or bad Confederate military fortunes in a kind of compensatory fashion. It followed a much simpler pattern. At the start of the war Confederate press opinion was certain of European, especially British, involvement in the war in the interests of the cotton supply. So press interest in European attitudes was very high indeed. The Trent affair revived a now flagging interest when it seemed that English pride, rather than economic self-interest, might again make intervention possible. Again, expectations were not realised. As the war dragged on the prospect of intervention diminished further. Without the hope of European involvement there was nothing in that far-off continent to arouse interest; it became un-newsworthy.

CHAPTER 1

A FREEDOM ABUNDANTLY USED

The dangers of relying on newspapers for historical research are well known: there are sometimes factual inaccuracies, contradictions, partiality, editorial slanting and selection. As E. Merton Coulter says, however, these cautions apply to news reporting and not to editorial comment.[1] Editorial opinion, by its nature, cannot be inaccurate: it can only be to varying degrees honest, intelligent, perceptive, independent, informed, and so on. At the very least a study of such opinion will give the researcher a summary of attitudes that were held by a number of influential people in different parts of the country. But it may also be claimed that those editors spoke not merely as individuals, but as spokesmen for a far wider constituency. Such is the hypothesis on which the following is based: that editors did in fact guide and form, but also reflected, public opinion.[2] In normal times it is the raison d'etre of journalists so to do. The relationship between newspapermen and the public was almost certainly sharper in a period of desperate danger and isolation, when the newspapers were virtually the only printed means of disseminating information.

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[1] E. Merton Coulter, The Confederate States of America, 1861-1865 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), p.583.

[2] This issue is raised by Eunice Wead, "British Public Opinion of the Peace with America in 1782, "American Historical Review, XXVl (April 1929), pp. 530-531.

That collectively newspapers played an important part in the progress of the Civil War is almost beyond doubt. Coulter suggests that their influence was so immense that the press had "almost within its keeping the very destiny of the Confederacy."[3] Charles S. Sydnor acknowledges the "powerful influence" of the Richmond editors of the Old South, and Harrison Trexler claims that the decline of Confederate morale was to a significant degree the responsibility of the Richmond press.[4] Soon after the war, James Grant referred to the "powerful influence" of the editors in his history of the American press.[5] The sheer number of journals published in the Southern states is a clue to their importance. This has been estimated at something like eight hundred: country newspapers, the church press, camp papers, broadsheets, literary publications and magazines, and the newspaper press.[6]

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[3]Coulter, p.505.

[4]Harrison A. Trexler, "The Davis Administration and the Richmond Press." Journal of Southern History, XVl (May 1950), p.195.

[4]Charles S. Sydnor, The Development of Southern Sectionalism, 1819-1848 (Louisiana State University Press, Louisiana Paperbacks 1968), p.228.

[5]James Grant, The Newspaper Press: Its Origins - Progress - And Present Position, (2 Vols., London: Tinsley Bros., 1871), Vol. 1, p.402.

[6]Coulter, p.584. On country newspapers see Thomas D. Clark, "The Country Newspaper: A Factor in Southern Opinion 1865-1930," J.S.H. XlV (Feb. 1948), pp.3-33.

The special economic, political, geographical and cultural traditions of the South produced a newspaper press that was quite different from that of Europe, especially in two related respects. It was free of government restriction and it was very diverse. The development of newspapers in Britain and France at the time of the Civil Was was mostly distinguished by government suspicion and control through censorship, libel laws, postal restrictions, and taxation. It was not until 1861 that the newspaper duty on the English press was removed; in France the government's attitude to the press was uncompromisingly restrictive.[7] But, as Daniel Boorstin wrote, "the local variety and wide dispersion of the American newspaper press made it extraordinarily difficult for the government to control or restrict it .... Who could muzzle a newspaper press that was diffused into every corner of a vast continent?"[8]

The uncompromising distrust and hatred unleashed by the war was not enough to let the government exercise control of the Southern press. The dual tenets of editorial independence and freedom of the press prevented it. As the Index, the Confederate newspaper published in England, noted: "in the South the press is not only free, but its freedom is abundantly used."[9] President

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[7]Richard D. Altick, The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900 (The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.354.

[8]Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The National Experience (Weidenfield & Nicolson, Penguin, 1969), p.174.

[9]Index, 27 November, 1862.

Jefferson Davis lamented with some cause a press that he thought partisan and venal.[10]

The Richmond Daily Examiner was relentlessly vitriolic in its attacks against Davis and the government, and many other Southern papers, the Macon Daily Telegraph for example, were highly critical of the government's handling of the war effort. As Coulter wrote:

> Added to the malignancy of the anti-Davis newspapers was an overzealous feeling for the freedom of the press -- the right to publish anything the editor chose -- and a lack of understanding of what might give aid and comfort to the enemy.11

Early in the war there were signs that the press would in some measure adopt what the government might have seen as a responsible attitude to war reporting. In June 1861 the Savannah Republican published a notice that was printed in other papers:

> Notice to the Press -- We are requested by the military authorities of the Confederate States to urge upon our brethren of the press, throughout the South, the importance of abstaining from all specific allusions to the movement of troops. The very wisest plans of the government may be thwarted by an untimely or otherwise injudicious exposure.12

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[10]Coulter, p.503; Trexler, p.195.

[11]Coulter, p.501.

[12]Quoted in Columbus Daily Enquirer, 13 June, 1861.

But the government and military authorities did nothing to encourage co-operation by making it easier for the press to report the war. There was a lack of co-operation from the War Department, the military commanders in the field, and the Postmaster General.[13] The newspapers were being forced to rely on the occasional official report, leaks from army staff officers, and from Northern newspapers. The Columbus Daily Enquirer asked for all "proper and correct intelligence of the war" instead of forcing the press to "accept accounts graciously permitted to be sent to us by the Federal authorities."[14] In addition to these restraints, in January 1862 the Confederate Congress considered passing a law that would make it a crime to publish any news concerning military strengths or movements.[15]

There was therefore a substantial division in attitude between the government and the press on how the war should be reported, with the result that the Federal government received military information from Confederate papers and civilian morale was in threat of being undermined. Nevertheless, the press believed deeply in the principle of press freedom and rigorously resisted any suggestions of

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[13] Hodding Carter, Their Words Were Bullets: The Southern Press in War, Reconstruction and Peace (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969), p.29; James W. Silver "Propaganda in the Confederacy," J.S.H., XI (Nov. 1945), pp.487-503; Coulter, pp.336-337.

[14] Columbus Daily Enquirer, 13 June, 1861.

[15] Ibid., 22 January, 1862.

government involvement. The Columbus Daily Enquirer sounded a warning against Congressional interference: "There is no necessity to forfeit a particle of our freedom in carrying out this war .... Congress cannot be too cautious on a matter of such importance."[16] In response to General Beauregard's refusal to allow reporters within twenty-five miles of the lines, the Mobile Register gave its view of the importance of an independent press:

> This is a war of opinion as well as arms. If our military Generals lead the soldiers of liberty to the cannon's mouth on the battlefield, it is the Generals of the Press who plan and fight the great moral battles of the revolution. The one deals in bayonets, bombshells, blood and sinews, and the other marshals the spirit of the revolution, inspires the courage and persuades to the [sic] sacrifices of the people. The army could no more carry on the war of independence without the press, than the press could spare the army; and while the Chiefs of the Army upon the occurrence of every crisis acknowledge this position by their free use of its moral arms, they owe to that co-operative power of the revolution, at least respect and common justice.17

There were also other problems facing the press. Their teams of reporters were inferior in size and organisation to those in the North -- the "Bohemian Brigade" as one historian of the press called them.[18] The established news agencies of the North were of course no longer available to Southern newspapers. Some attempt was made

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[16] Columbus Daily Enquirer, 22 January, 1862.

[17] Mobile Register & Advertiser, 29 May, 1862.

[18] Louis Starr, Bohemian Brigade: Civil War Newsmen in Action (New York: Knopf, 1954), p.iii.

to replace them after the Autumn of 1862: the Mutual Benefit Press, an association of the four Richmond newspapers; the Confederate Press Association; the Weekly Press Association of Georgia; and the Press Association of the Confederate States. Their coverage of the Confederacy was incomplete, however, and they were established too late.[19] The basic job of newsgetting was therefore a substantial problem for Southern editors. Quite late in the war, the Macon Daily Telegraph responded to what they called "repeated enquiries" about their sources for an article on foreign intervention: "We claim to have none which are not open to every careful observer."[20] But in January 1862 another editor was equally honest in demystifying the news business:

> Editors are currently presumed to possess a special fund of information ... and we, in common no doubt with most of our contemporaries, have been interrogated a thousand times ... as if our opinions were infallible. It is true that the press has opportunities of arriving at information in consequence of having access to numerous journals and correspondence, but, nevertheless, it is as subject to error as most individuals, and its conclusions are, therefore, not to be received with implicit trust.21

The near absence of informed government statements, the obstructions by the military, the inadequate reporting teams, were in a sense internal problems. To these must be added the accumulating effects of a defensive war; the manifold problems are described by Coulter:

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[19] Carter, pp. 32-33; Coulter, pp.496-97.

[20] Macon Daily Telegraph, 14 December, 1864.

[21] New Orleans Bee, 16 January, 1862.

> The volunteering editors, the lack of paper, the falling off of advertisements, the age-old difficulty of non-payment of subscriptions, poor postal service, the high cost of everything going into the making of a newspaper 22

In many cases these problems resulted in closure, and these occurred with perhaps surprising speed. During the first year of the war forty papers closed in Virginia alone, and by the end of 1862 only about fourteen percent of newspapers remained in business. North Carolina lost twenty-six papers; in Texas only ten out of sixty remained after one year of war; the invasion of Mississippi forced the closure of sixty-six papers.[23] Those that survived were drastically reduced in size.[24] By the end of 1864 editorial morale was at a very low ebb:

> Everything is out of joint -- bridges are washed away, so that mails are interrupted, and letters and papers delayed, and wires are down, so that telegraphic communications are interrupted. The few papers received contain but little of general interest, while there is a complete dearth of news from the army.25

These various factors aggravated the problem, but Southern newspapers throughout the war had great difficulty in gathering information both for news items and editorials. The shortage of "hard" news forced editors often to rely on conjecture, supposition, and extrapolation. There was a tendency for editors to use phrases

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[22]Coulter, p.493.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Index, 27 November, 1862; Starr, p.iii.

[25]Macon Daily Telegraph, 24 December, 1864.

such as: "There are some very numerous signs which indicate a growing conviction ...."; "the English papers contain a good deal to show that ...."; information "said to be derived from semi-official sources ...."; "information from a gentleman in Paris ...."; observations from a "gentleman of the highest reputation for talent and foresight ...." The rumour was rife. Every newspaper reported them and often discussed them at length. These comments are from a single edition: "We have rumours on rumours -- so much smoke as seems certain to indicate fire ...." The Canadian press "assures us that something is in the wind ...." "The best informed correspondents of Northern papers state that ...."[26] Towards the end of 1862 an Alabama paper explained that the "public entertains with a lively interest every rumour ... [and we] think it altogether proper to lay before our readers such 'straws' that float on the current, and to allow them to judge if they can, how the wind blows.[27] By the end of 1864 even the rumours were drying up as the invasion disrupted communications almost totally. The Macon Daily Telegraph complained of the unfavourable circumstances in which "we are deprived of all exchange papers except in our immediate neighbourhood from which to gather news, make selections, or catch an idea ...." It went on:

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[26] Mobile Register & Advertiser, 20 August, 1861.

[27] Ibid., 7 November, 1862.

> the poor overtaxed editor is expected to furnish an interesting paper with each rising sun. He racks his brain for something wise and witty; he searches his few exchanges with eagerness, and runs his scissors remorselessly around any paragraph which promises to be of interest. He elaborates each startling rumour and wakes the interest of his readers with mysterious hints of wonderful events about to be developed. Those who hastily scan the columns of a daily paper in these times, little know the labour and anxiety it has cost in the preparation.28

Newspaper editorials in the mid-nineteenth century, as today, did not limit themselves to facts; they quite rightly dealt with ideas too. Nevertheless, the credibility of editorials must be based on the presumption that they speak with authority, that they are the results of informed opinion, and that they have tapped sources of information not easily available to the reader. For editorials concerned with European affairs, these sources were almost exclusively other newspapers: Northern, Canadian, European. This necessarily led to a reliance on the wider newspaper fraternity for news and opinion about the major Euro-American issues -- the blockade, recognition, intervention, cotton -- and led also to a kind of incestuous dialogue among newspapers. As suggested, this must have been at least in part the result of the dearth of alternative sources. It was also, it might be speculated, a reflection of the esteem felt within the fraternity for the standing and authority of the newspaper press generally. It seemed to be accepted implicitly that when a newspaper spoke, it spoke also for its readership.

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[28] Macon Daily Telegraph, 3 December, 1864.

In America generally, the press was deeply established, from the august papers of the seaboard states to the "booster press" in the West.[29] But the South did not develop a metropolitan press equivalent to, say, the New York Times or the Times of London. Richmond, Virginia, with a population of roughly 38,000 in 1862 was served by no less than five newspapers.[30] Even in this major Southern city it was therefore possible to develop a close relationship between the public and the highly visible and generally political editors.

These editors were a special breed: a kind of thuggish literati. James Grant, the press historian writing in 1871, pointed to a fundamental difference between the advocacy and vigorous language of the English press, and the "violence, often mingled with coarseness, in the tone and terms of the daily papers" in America.[31] Even a cursory glance at the Southern editorials makes clear what Grant meant. The Style is cavalier, provocative, quarrelsome, and often irresponsible. The Index partly explained the attitude: "In journalism, as in war, the attack has the advantage over defence; it is easier, more pleasant, and generally more spirited and more effectual."[32] The Southern people tended not

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[29]Boorstin, pp.161-174.

[30]Starr, p.viii.

[31]Grant, p.398.

[32]Index, 27 November, 1862.

to read books.[33] The editors therefore reached their public through rhetoric that reflected the hustings and the pulpit. Hodding Carter put it this way:

> The Southern editors for 150 years have been spokesmen, defenders, and firebrands in their regions to an extent not in evidence anywhere except perhaps the old West. They have used their type fonts as bullets, their newsprint as musket wadding, their ink as gunpowder, and their words as tinder.34

Many of these men were sophisticated and influential, respected within their communities and beyond. Charles Sydnor has referred to the "distinguished and powerful Richmond editors" of the 1830's and 1840's. Thomas Ritchie, editor of the Richmond Enquirer before his death in 1854, was described in the Index as "the father of the Southern press."[35] He was a political "nabob" who, according to Bernard Weisberger, "was not only a power in the legislative caucuses but a necessary part of every public meeting, ball, banquet in Richmond .... Editor, citizen, and politician were at one with him."[36] And so with the news of Fort Sumter; it was not to the State capitol that the procession went with its Confederate flags and torches, but to the Enquirer offices where the crowd was addressed by one of the editors.[37] The Enquirer's rival,

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[33]Sydnor, p.306.

[34]Carter, p.1.

[35]Sydnor, p.228; Index, 27 November, 1862.

[36]Bernard A. Weisberger, The American Newspaperman (The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p.69.

[37]Alfred Hoyt Bill, The Beleagured City:Richmond 1861 - 1865 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), p.39.

the Examiner, had its editorial powerhouse in John Moncure Daniel, described as "half genius, half misanthrope" who produced with his editors, including Edward A. Pollard, a hard-hitting, erratic, and often fanatical newspaper.[38] These Southern editors were not always self-made entrepreneurs or grass-roots politicos. John Forsyth, editor of the Mobile Register, apart from being a distinguished newspaperman was a former minister to Mexico and representative in the Alabama legislature.[39] Captain Obadiah Wise, described by Trexler as an "editorial personality" during his period with the Enquirer was the son of a former governor of Virginia, Henry A. Wise.[40] Another editor of the Enquirer, Jennings Wise, studied at Heidelberg, was attached to the American legation in Berlin, and had been secretary of the legation in Paris.[41]

The newspapers produced by men like these varied in style and quality. They included papers like the New Orleans Bee and the Mobile Register which were moderate and balanced; the Richmond Dispatch, a "popular" newspaper; the Examiner -- the Ishmael -- said by the Index to be against everybody, "all parties, all men, and we may say, all measures."[42] There were many hundreds more serving the

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[38] Trexler, p.181.

[39] Charles P. Cullop, Confederate Propaganda in Europe, 1861-1865 (Coral Gables: University of Miami, 1969), p.20.

[40] Trexler, p.178.

[41] Bill, p.16.

[42] Index, 27 November, 1862.

Confederacy, the smallest community as well as the cities. Every citizen had access to a paper of some kind, from the county weeklies to one of the plethora of dailies. The paper served not only the purchaser and the immediate family, but possibly changed hands and, through discussion, was transmitted orally to a wider public.

According to a contemporary observer, the editors were independent in their opinions and free from vested interests.[43] They were also provincial. They were influenced by the communities they served, and in turn sought to influence those communities: it is a natural relationship in journalism. According to Hodding Carter, the Southern press "demonstrated closer identification with the aspirations of their regions than have those of any other part of the United States."[44] And during this period when a monolithic issue dominated the Confederacy, when every area of life -- public, personal, social, economic -- was touched by it, the relationship between the press and the public must have been closer than in more normal times. The newspapers most often were the only means available to supply the public's need for information, and it is the raison d'etre of journalists to pose the questions that their readership wants answered. Daniel Boorstin makes this point

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[43] T.C. DeLeon, Four Years in Rebel Capitals: An Inside View of Life in the Southern Confederacy, from Birth To Death (Mobile, 1890), pp.288-89, quoted in Trexler, p.178.

[44] Carter, p.1.

in the preface to Bernard Weisberger's book on American newspapermen:

> The unexpected current of daily life define the newspaperman's subjects for him .... [He] writes about the living and for the living .... [He] records the daily concerns of his age 45

During the Civil War the newspapers were, as might be expected, absorbed by the same issues. There were divergences of views on specific problems. But they were united in the broadest sense, and as James Grant suggested in 1871, they had the power to affect public opinion in a direct way:

> Public opinion, not only politically and morally, but socially, is powerfully influenced in all countries by the tone of their public journals. It is impossible it could be otherwise; for the community in every country must, however unconsciously, imbibe the spirit of the newspapers which they daily read.46

The Confederate press was far from elitist. It did not want to speak only for the civil and military worthies. In fact, far from it. Its voice was most often populist, critical of authority, impatient, cantankerous at times, and quick to react to events. In these desperate times it was not always rational or consistent. But the important point is that the newspapers were a part of a two-way process; the communication cycle was a complete one.

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[45]Daniel Boorstin, Preface to The American Newspaperman, p.viii.

[46]Grant, p.402.

Hotze, Confederate propagandist and editor of the Index, subtly and succinctly summed up the influence of the press:

> The Southern press ... is representative. It does not seek to make, but to feed and direct public opinion. Still, it is not a mere delegate, but exercises a controlling influence over that which gives it power and vitality.47

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[47] Index, 27 November, 1862.

CHAPTER 11

A STRICT AND IMPARTIAL NEUTRALITY

Britain's wartime relationship with the Confederacy started on 13 May, 1861 with Queen Victoria's Proclamation of Neutrality to Parliament, and became common knowledge a few days later when the Southern newspapers published the text:

> whereas hostilities have unhappily commenced between the Government of the United States of America and certain States styling themselves the Confederate States of America ... we, being at peace with the Government of the United States, have declared our royal determination to maintain a strict and impartial neutrality in the contest between the said contending parties ....

Even as the Proclamation was being read, the Richmond Whig was preparing for print an editorial which claimed that "we may very safely look for recognition as soon as we want." And three days later, it expressed the view that England was preparing a "world of trouble for Old Abe and Seward," suggesting that direct government by "the amiable and accomplished lady who rules the British Empire" was not an impossibility.[1]

Britain's declaration of neutrality was followed by similar declarations from France, Spain, Russia, Brazil and the Netherlands.

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[1] Richmond Whig, 13 May, 1861; ibid., 17 May, 1861.

The web of interacting links and rivalries ensured a concerted response to Britain's decision which itself was based on realpolitik, made all the more solid because in this matter the Conservative opposition was aligned with the Liberal government's thinking.[2] This alignment and, as James Baxter affirms, the logic of national self-interest -- military, commercial, territorial -- ensured "the highest standards of neutral performance."[3]

Therefore, a month after Sumter and two months before First Manassas the political and military reality of Europe's place in the Civil War had been firmly established. At least the European powers recognised "the self-evident fact of the existence of a war," Jefferson Davis wrote later. But, of course, the Confederates were greatly disappointed. As Jefferson Davis put it, "the neutral nations of Europe pursued a policy which, nominally impartial, was practically most favourable to our enemies and most detrimental to us."[4]

The press were more direct in their language. English neutrality was, claimed the Whig, "tantamount to intervention in favour of the North" and that "British neutrality amount to an

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[2]Henry Blumenthal, "Confederate Diplomacy: Popular Notions and International Realities," J.S.H. XXXII (1966), pp.166-167.

[3]James Baxter, "The British Government and Neutral Rights," A.H.R. XXXIV (Oct. 1928), p.9.

[4]Jefferson Davis, The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1881), 1:376,369.

Anglo-Yankee alliance."[5] This sentiment was expressed throughout the war. In May 1863 the Macon Daily Telegraph published an editorial that reflected a growing anger and frustration:

> Of all the humbug, the greatest, undoubtedly, is English neutrality. The impudence and audacity with which the English Government and English writers have maintained, that they have held a strict neutral position in reference to the Federals and Confederates, have been remarkable even for the English hypocrisy.6

The anger lasted through to the end of the war when the Macon Daily Telegraph declared that Britain's objective was to "disable both sides , and to build up its own fortunes on their common ruin."[7]

It may not have been Britain's conscious policy to aid the North, but there were sound reasons for the South believing it to be so. Robert Huhn Jones in his work on Anglo-American relations states that "for better or worse," neutrality benefited the North, and indeed Britain also.[8] The Confederate press believed that the North exerted pressure on Britain: the Yankees got away with interrupting British shipping "as if it were a Chinese junk;" they prevented Confederate ships being built in Britain; they were able

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[5]Richmond Whig, 19 March, 1862; ibid., 19 April, 1862.

[6]Macon Daily Telegraph, 14 May, 1863.

[7]Ibid., 7 April, 1865.

[8]Robert Huhn Jones, "Anglo-American Relations, 1861-1865 Reconsidered," Mid-America XIV (January, 1963), pp.36-49.

to recruit in England and Ireland.[9] It was claimed also that although the Confederates had privateers, they were not, as was the North, allowed to use British colonial ports; and while the North was able to import from Britain openly, the South was not.[10] The Richmond Whig offered a homily: British neutrality was only fine words, but "fine words butter no parsnips."[11] The Richmond Daily Examiner in an editorial dated 14 May 1862, went further in accusing Britain, and other European powers, of double standards and of favouring the North even to their own disadvantage:

> [While] ... permitting the South to be cut off from relations with [Europe] they have opened their armories, foundries and vast stores of military material to the Northern adversary. The result is now before them. The Southern navy has been annihilated .... Their [the European powers'] maritime rival ... is without a competitor in American waters. If those governments had observed the role of strict and absolute impartiality, giving the South the same facilities for procuring war materials ... the maritime interests of Europe would have had a powerful adjunct and support in American waters.

Therefore, to the extent that neutrality was an accepted fact it was perceived as uneven in its application. It was not totally accepted by the Southern press as a firm and unalterable policy. Periodically the newspapers referred to neutrality as if surprised that it actually existed. There seemed to be a feeling that it was only a matter of time before the brutal reality of a cotton dearth

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[9] Macon Daily Telegraph, 14 May, 1863.

[10] Richmond Whig, 6 January, 1863.

[11] Ibid., 19 April, 1862.

would force Europe, and particularly England, into some kind of intervention. This is an understandable attitude since to believe firmly that Europe was permanently committed to neutrality as Britain had defined it was logically to accept the fact that there would be no recognition of independence nor a rejection of the blockade.

Blockading the Confederacy was the North's first major strategic manoeuvre, and it was a psychological as well as an economic and military blow to the Confederacy. According to Gordon Wright, discussion of this issue was "woven through most of the [French] consular reports during the war."[12] Certainly the Confederate press was consumed with the blockade and placed the very highest priority on it being lifted. They did not see it in isolation; recognition was also a matter of the greatest concern. The blockade was a tangible matter and an affront, and that gave to it an immediacy that the perhaps more abstract political concept of recognition did not have. In any case, the press believed that if Europe could be induced to raise the blockade it would mean, ipso facto, that neutrality was at an end, and that the path was open to recognition.

The Confederate press believed that the blockade was illogical, illegal and ineffective. It was illogical because if it was true,

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[12] Gordon Wright, "Economic Conditions in the Confederacy as Seen by the French Consuls," J.S.H. VII (May, 1941), p.198.

as the North claimed, that the Union was intact and therefore Washington had jurisdiction over the South, then the Northern government was blockading its own ports.[13] The blockade was illegal by precedent: the New Orleans Bee made the point that both the United States and Great Britain opposed the King of Naples when he blockaded his ports during a rebellion. It was illegal also because of precedents in international law: the Declaration of Paris established the principle that a blockade would be binding only if it were effective, and the South denied this to be the case.[14] The press made much of their claim that the blockade was ineffective because this was the real key to persuading the European nations to break it. They proffered an argument that sought to combine a call for justice with the prospect of practical advantage for Europe and the South. Because the blockade was ineffective, so went the argument, it was right that Europeans should judge it a "paper blockade" and therefore ignore it. By so doing, European shipping would enter Southern ports, thus further substantiating its ineffectiveness, deliver much needed goods, and collect cotton equally important for European industry. With the right incentive England would brush aside the blockade as though it were "a mere cobweb", claimed a Georgian planter.[15]

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[13] Columbus Daily Enquirer, 30 December, 1861. See also Richmond Examiner, 22 August, 1861; New Orleans Bee, 18 May, 1861, and 4 January, 1862.

[14] New Orleans Bee, 4 January, 1862.

[15] Columbus Enquirer, 12 June, 1861.

During the opening months of the war, the Confederate press was optimistic about the blockade. Much was made of the published views of leading personalities such as Lord Grenville and Lord Lyon. Lord John Russell was quoted as having said "distinctly and emphatically" that the blockade had to be effective if it was to be respected. Therefore, claimed the Richmond Whig, the "paper blockade" which Seward proposed to establish would be treated with universal contempt.[16] In the view of the Confederacy the very extent of the task of blockading two thousand miles of coastline "with the numerous inlets from the James River to the Savannah" was nothing short of laughable.[17]

It was possible, however, for the Northern forces to blockade specific ports at certain times. Therefore, when the British bark Hiawatha was captured at the mouth of the River James the Richmond Whig raised the question whether the blockade could be effective if only part of the coast was closed.[18]

Naturally, during the first months of the war the Southern press interpreted the cases of reported blockade busting as proof positive that the blockade was ineffective, and often they overstated the likely outcome. When the Alliance, another British

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[16] Richmond Whig, 25 May, 1861.

[17] Richmond Daily Examiner, 13 August, 1861.

[18] Richmond Whig, 30 October, 1861.

vessel, reached the port of Beaufort in North Carolina in August 1861 "without let or hindrance" it was enough, without any doubt, to declare that legally and practically the blockade ceased to exist.[19] This kind of response was possible because it was believed that if Europe knew that the blockade was ineffective such a climate of unease and irritation would be created to ensure intervention.[20] According to the Richmond Daily Examiner the result of such an intervention would be swift and total:

> British merchants will immediately send to the Southern ports vessels laden with such stores as they may suppose most saleable in the country, and commissioned to bring back cargoes of tobacco and cotton. Should the government of the United States be mad enough to interfere with any one of them, ... the event will bring upon it the maritime force of the civilized world .... In a couple of months more we may, therefore, reasonably anticipate the re-opening of European commerce; and the consequence ... can scarcely be too highly stated 21

The "consequence" was expected to be a European attitude of "peace at any price." But this was the high point of King Cotton's reign, during the first six months or so of 1861. Later in 1861 and in early 1862, the period of military reverses following First Manassas, the mood shifted from confidence to doubt. Specific cases of successful blockade running were reported, such as the

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[19] Richmond Examiner, 30 August, 1861.

[20] New Orleans Bee, 18 May, 1861; Richmond Whig, 1 August, 1861.

[21] Richmond Examiner, 30 August, 1861.

"Bermuda" at Savannah in November 1861, and newspapers like the New Orleans Bee and the Richmond Whig drew on "accurate statistics" to report five hundred cases of blockade busting.[22] But the so called "paper blockade" remained. The Columbus Enquirer became introspective: "We boast that 'Cotton is King' but an inefficient and feeble blockade now strips this commercial monarch of his power ...."[23] The New Orleans Bee looked outwards:

> The blockade is notoriously ineffective and illegal, and as such is not entitled to the respect of Neutral powers .... We cannot possibly believe that the principal nations of Europe will much longer brook so insufferable a wrong, and so vital an injury to their commerce.24

In July 1861, the Columbus Daily Enquirer expressed a common sentiment that can best be described as an optimism blended with sharp political realism. The raising of the blockade was inevitable. The economic collapse of the cotton trade would bring pressure on the French and especially the British. The "simple question" for these governments to ponder was:

> whether they will soonest procure the freedom of the cotton trade in permitting the United States speedily to crush the Southern 'rebellion' or by assisting the Southerners to raise the blockade.25

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[22] New Orleans Bee, 15 November, 1861 and 17 February, 1862.

[23] Columbus Enquirer, 7 November, 1861.

[24] New Orleans Bee, 31 December, 1861.

[25] Columbus Enquirer, 8 July, 1861.

The frequent demand for justice, either in international law or by some ill-defined standard of morality, was little more than rhetoric. What really underpinned the confidence of the Confederate press was a belief in the power of mutual interest:

> They want our staple, we want theirs [manufactured products]. They have command of the ocean -- they can break Lincoln's blockade in twenty-four hours, let them do it.26

This notion was not quite as starkly put as that of King Cotton, but it was only a step away. The tone of the press suggested incredulity, and England and France rather than the Confederacy were placed in the role of victims. The blockade was described as a "pistol at the breasts of ten million Frenchmen and Englishmen." The North, it was claimed, was in "covert war" against the European powers. It was therefore "probable" that "for their own interest and necessities" England and France would raise the blockade.[27] The Richmond Whig asked:

> How long under the inexorable pressure of events will England maintain her present tone of moderation? Will it be when her tobacco revenue is extinguished and Lancashire cries aloud for cotton, or will her policy now be what it ever has been from the consolara del mare, down to the present hour, to measure her regard for maritime law precisely by the exigencies of her commercial position.28

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[26] Richmond Whig, 20 May, 1861.

[27] Richmond Examiner, 12 July, 1861, 13 July, 1861; New Orleans Bee, 24 August, 1861.

[28] Richmond Whig, 21 June, 1861.

By the winter of 1861–62 the newspapers were publishing more widely the view that Europe was unlikely to risk war with the North over the blockade. In a number of articles beginning in December 1861 the Macon Daily Telegraph questioned the assumption that Europe would intervene to break the blockade, until in February 1862 it admitted that "we ought now finally dismiss the idea of having the blockade broken this spring."[29] In November 1861 the New Orleans Bee expressed a growing disillusionment, and perhaps maturity: The South should

> defeat the enemy and raise the blockade ... without the slightest reference to the policy of foreign nations. We have already dallied too much with precious time, in the childish hope that Europe would loose the Gordian knot which it is our business to cut with the sword.30

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[29] Macon Daily Telegraph, 5 December, 1861; 15 February, 1862.

[30] New Orleans Bee, 26 November, 1861.

CHAPTER 111
THE FRAGILE OPTIMISM

Repudiation of the blockade, and therefore rejection of neutrality as the British had defined it, was one way the South hoped Europe might intervene in the Civil War. There were others: recognition of Southern independence, mediation for a favourable end to hostilities, and, most extreme, armed intervention on behalf of the Confederacy. One diplomatic initiative, not actively sought by the Southern press, was the belligerent status declared by Britain and France in May 1861. This caused little interest in the press for the good reason, pointed out by E. Merton Coulter, that it amounted to "nothing more than recognition that a war rather than a street fight was in progress and that the rules of war were now in effect."[1]

The Trent affair probably more than any other single event gave justification for the belief that Britain would end her neutrality and in some way assist the Confederacy, most likely by declaring war

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[1] Coulter, p.187.

against the Union.[2] In this, as in other moments of high hopes, the Confederate press expressed a fragile optimism that did not easily survive the stress of changing circumstances.

The Trent affair was, said the Macon Daily Telegraph, the North's "maddest prank" and for which Britain was bound to demand redress. The Columbus Daily Enquirer had, it claimed, despaired that Britain would ever interfere with the blockade but believed that she could not "submit to this act of the Lincoln government." It was, said the Richmond Enquirer, "impossible for the English government, without disgrace, to fail to enact the fullest reparation."[3] And the New Orleans Bee which on the whole gave the most sophisticated analysis of the crisis, believed, at least in the early days, that Britain would "demand prompt and complete reparation, in default of which she will be ready to launch the thunderbolts of war."[4]

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[2]The Trent affair was the incident in which the ship carrying Jefferson Davis' commissioners, James Mason and John Slidell, who were bound for Europe to argue the Confederate cause, was stopped by the Union warship San Jacinto and the commissioners arrested. The incident was known by the name of the British ship, Trent.

[3]Macon Daily Telegraph, 19 December, 1861; Columbus Enquirer, 19 November, 1861; Richmond Enquirer, 19 November, 1861.

[4]New Orleans Bee, 27 November, 1861.

All the newspapers used the rhetoric of war, seeking to give the British a reason for joining the hostilities: the capture of a British ship was an insult to British honour, it showed disrespect for the British flag, it was a profound indignity, and it was an offence against international law. An enthusiastic editorial in the Richmond Enquirer sums up the tenor of the press during this period:

> We rejoice that it was put into the minds of Wilkes to insult the British flag .... And we rejoice that John Bull has put down his head and levelled his horns. We rejoice to hear the roar of the English Lion in an honest cause.5

There was also a balanced and thoughtful side to Confederate journalism. This was to be found in, among others, the Columbus Enquirer. It pointed out that Britain would not act out of a hysterical sense of battered pride. If it was in her interest to make war against the North she would do so and neither international law nor "old foggy precepts or learned dissertations would stand in her way."[6] The New Orleans Bee took the view that although Britain had suffered "a most gross and shameful indignity" she was foremost a "political nation" and before taking action would have to be convinced that the stability of her government or the welfare of her people were threatened. The Trent affair merely

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[5] Richmond Enquirer, 20 December, 1861.

[6] Columbus Enquirer, 25 November, 1861, 20 December, 1861.

offered a "justifiable pretext" should Britain want to raise the blockade, and on the whole this was thought unlikely.[7]

The attitude and response of the North was of course the crucial factor in the outcome of the affair. The Richmond Examiner expressed the view that "the North is furious for war with England. The British Lion is to be subdued; John Bull has now found his match; the mission of the United States is to put him down."[8] A week later the paper had modified its position to one that was more widely held in the press:

> Alas! We are forced to the painful confession, that amid all their lunacy, and in the midst of their wildest frenzy, the Northern nation have steadily and consistently preserved untouched one trait of their ordinary character and natural disposition. It is their cowardice. Sane or mad, drunk or sober, they are always the same pusillanimous poltroons.9

Neither Britain nor the North wanted confrontation. The Confederate press expressed a bitter disappointment in an avalanche of invective. The North had given an "infamous and unconditional apology"; it was the "most ignominious back-down ever perpetrated by any nation of respectable power"; the Union was guilty of "fawning sycophancy" and "miserable cowardice"; it had suffered a deep "humiliation."[10] The New Orleans Bee ranted:

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[7] New Orleans Bee, 20 November, 1861, 4 December, 1861.

[8] Richmond Examiner, 20 December, 1861.

[9] Ibid., 27 December, 1861.

[10] Richmond Whig, 4 January, 1862; Macon Daily Telegraph, 27 December, 1861; New Orleans Bee, 4 February, 1862.

> when the British Lion growled and showed his teeth, we expected that the Yankee jackle would put his tail between his legs, lower his crest and lick the dust in abject humility, and this is exactly what he has done.11

The outcome of the Trent affair weakened the prospect of British interference with the blockade. The earlier optimism of the Confederate press was based in the belief that Britain needed the cotton supply at any cost, and this proved to be untrue. The press responded in three ways. The weakest response was to suggest that the European powers might yet raise the blockade. Another was to urge retribution through a refusal to plant new cotton crops and destroy stocks. Two motives governed the latter response. Firstly, the psychological need to strike out at Europe: "Why should our people insanely plant cotton? The blockade is upon us, fixed and fastened for an indefinite length of time. Intervention by Foreign States is dead, if it ever had any vitality." Secondly, as a possible shock that "might startle France and England from their apathy," through knowledge that "not a single bale of cotton or a pound of tobacco will be allowed to leave Southern ports for Europe until those ports are open to the commerce of nations by the raising of the blockade."[12] The third reason for the press response

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[11] New Orleans Bee, 3 January, 1862.

[12] Macon Daily Telegraph, 26 February, 1862; New Orleans Bee, 13 March, 1862.

was allied to the last, but it encouraged the South to continue the war without foreign assistance:

> It has taken much time and many pregnant facts to convince our countrymen that they must win their own battles .... Not without many a fond and lingering look across the Atlantic have they slowly and reluctantly abandoned the once sanguine hopes of a speedy interference.13

The government and the Confederate press placed a great store on British recognition, and a vast number of editorials concentrated attention on the question. Undoubtedly the advantages to the Confederacy would have been enormous. Diplomatic channels would have opened and, as Coulter points out, the trading and commercial opportunities would have been of "inestimable value."[14] But the press seemed to put comparatively little importance on these effects, tending to emphasize the psychological advantages:

> It will be nothing less than the deliberate and solemn judgement of the nations according it, that the Confederate States are, and of right ought to be, free, sovereign and independent--that they cannot be subjugated--and that the war ought to [cease]. Such action by England and France and the other chief powers, foreshadowed by an almost unanimous popular sentiment ... would confront our enemy with the public opinion of the world.15

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[13] New Orleans Bee, 2 April, 1862.

[14] Coulter, pp.188-89.

[15] Richmond Whig, 6 August, 1862.

The positive conviction that recognition would be achieved was energetically held, although short lived, and it was held partly from a sense of desperation: "There is no possible compromise, no alternative between our extermination, and our recognition as a free and sovereign nation."[16] The British and French press, although unpredictable in their support, were a source of much comfort to those in the South. The early military successes during the Peninsular Campaign added to the sense of optimism. To quote the Macon Daily Telegraph of 7 July 1862: "The Battle of Richmond, will remove the least doubt of our ability to maintain ourselves, and Europe will wait on the Lincolnites no longer for cotton."[17] And the belief in cotton itself gave strength: "We can ... very safely rely on our impregnable position -- on the command of which our products hold over the vital interests of the British Empire, for as speedy a recognition as we may desire."[18] By August 1861 the mood was set:

> We ask no aid to handle this rampant fanaticism of the North; single handed we can subdue and shackle it in its confines beyond the Mason and Dixon's line; by the sword we can win and hold our independence, and now that we have shown that we can do so, we may demand our recognition of foreign powers as their equals among nations, not as the dependents of their magnanimity.19

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[16] New Orleans Bee, 27 June, 1861.

[17] Macon Daily Telegraph, 7 July, 1862.

[18] Richmond Whig, 23 May, 1861.

[19] Mobile Register, 20 August, 1861.

Blumenthal calls this "the period of 'sanguine expectations'" which is apt indeed.[20] By the winter of 1861-62 there was, however, the start of a discernible shift away from complete optimism towards doubt, and with that an antagonism towards Britain that at times was brutal in its force and vitriolic in its language. The Mobile Register asked in February 1862:

> Why has she not recognised us? Why has she, an eminently selfish power in her policy, resisted every inducement of interest, every incitement of passion stimulated by the hostile deportment of the North, and thus long refused to us a common right and justice ....?

In answer to this rhetorical question, the issue of slavery was brought into the open: "It is because we are a 'peculiar people' -- peculiar as the Israelites were of old among the surrounding Gentiles."[21] The Mobile Register thundered against the "government of Great Britain, and the sickly sentimental cant of abolitionism." "Exeter Hallism is triumphant" it claimed, with reference to the British abolitionist movement in England. Palmerston was berated: "The terrible filthy thing of slavery comes betwixt the wind and the gentility of my Lord ... when he is obliged to approach the South ...." The editorial went on:

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[20] Henry Blumenthal, A Reappraisal of Franco-American Relations, 1830-1871 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959), p.158.

[21] Mobile Register, 2 February, 1862.

> We may expect no favour, not even right. We are a 'peculiar people' -- a slaveocracy, beyond the pale of human sympathies .... There is no help for us but in our own might and the favour of heaven .... Let us shut our eyes to all the outside world, and fight out our destiny without looking beyond the points of our bayonets. If the rest of the world will have nothing to do with us, let us have nothing to do with it 22

By the summer of 1862 a tired resignation seemed to weigh on the Southern press. In June the Richmond Examiner went so far as to say: "Recognition of a government that is struggling in the agonies of death is a diplomatic impossibility."[23] The next month the Columbus Daily Enquirer summed up this new feeling:

> Human governments are not institutions of benevolence .... They care very little about the interests of each other .... All the complaints, therefore, about the tardiness of England and France to recognise the independence of the South, are mere reflections of the world we live in.24

By the autumn of 1862 there was little optimism left. The press looked for a "cogent" reason why Britain would recognise the Confederacy, and none was forthcoming. At about this time the Southern press began to consider more closely the position of France. In a sense this was understandable. Napoleon had made clear his wish to recognise the Confederacy, and the Confederate commissioners received a much warmer welcome in Paris than in London. But to turn

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[22]Ibid., 11 March, 1862.

[23]Richmond Examiner, 17 June, 1862.

[24]Columbus Daily Enquirer, 17 July, 1862.

to France at this time must have been more symbolic as a rejection of Britain than a realistic expectation of French action, since it had been made absolutely clear that France would recognise the Confederacy only if Britain acted first. Even when Slidell offered the French major trading advantages, including free cotton, Napoleon dared not act alone.[25]

The Confederate press understood the political situation in Europe and realised there were major problems in the way of a favourable response, although it was not often stated explicitly. It was implicit, however, in the strategy they adopted towards Napoleon: a mixture of flattery and enticement. Napoleon was now referred to as "sagacious," "clear headed", and "untethered" by ideology. He could readily be "brought to see the immense advantages, which could be accrued to France from a close and exclusive commercial alliance with the Southern States."[26]

From the spring of 1862 through the following winter, this complex balancing of attitudes continued towards, on the one hand, a discredited Britain whose support was still begrudgingly sought and, on the other, to France which was viewed, despite the rhetoric, very much as a less attractive prospect. The final stage was when France too was found wanting, and the accusing finger was pointed at the whole map of Europe.

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[25]Coulter, pp.185-190.

[26]Richmond Whig, 5 February, 1862.

The rationale for expecting French assistance was based on two factors: first, that the special commercial relationship would save the French clothing industry and, second, that Napoleon's adventure in Mexico would be strengthened if he had a friendly ally as a neighbour. On that basis, the Mobile Register looked forward, as it obliquely put it, to "early and important revelations from abroad."[27] The Columbus Enquirer cautioned its readers not to "overestimate the value of recognition by such a power as France" while accepting the fact that there would be enormous advantages should it be achieved.[28] Britain and other European powers might follow with recognition. The confidence of the South would be greatly enhanced, as the North's would be diminished. The North's threat that war would follow recognition would be tested and found empty.

During the autumn of 1862, however, the press seemed to believe that European assistance was improbable. Consolation was now offered: non-recognition at least meant there were no obligations which the South would have to honour in the future.[29]

The presence of British consuls accredited to the United States and still in the South became acutely irritating, and virtually all the press favoured their expulsion. The period of greatest concern was the summer of 1863. Later in that same summer and early in the

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[27] Mobile Register, 18 April, 1862.

[28] Weekly Columbus Enquirer, 24 June, 1862.

[29] Columbus Enquirer, 13 September, 1862.

autumn the very much more serious issue emerged when the Confederate Commissioner to England was treated with coolness by Lord Palmerston: "It must be a source of bitter humiliation to every Southern heart to contemplate the spectacle of a Southern Commissioner, hat in hand, obsequiously begging English abolitionists to recognise the Southern Confederacy."[30] The Mobile Register summed up nicely the attitude now widely held by the Southern press: "We have happily done with Old England as well as New England, and neither expect nor ask nor require recognition from one or the other."[31]

A very low point had been reached in the Confederate editors' relations with Britain. The press believed that the Confederacy had suffered a massive diplomatic failure over the issue of recognition; the apparently off-hand treatment of their commissioner only served to deepen the resentment. The enormous military disasters of Gettysburg and Vicksburg added to the feelings of despair. Since Britain, far more than France, was blamed for prolonging the war it is not surprising that the press spared no quarter in condemning a nation that had, to all intent and purpose, become an enemy.

The Richmond Whig was the most consistent and aggressive critic of Britain during this period. Of the many editorials, one

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[30] Richmond Whig, 3 August, 1863.

[31] Mobile Register, 21 October, 1863.

published in July 1863 expressed the anger best. Far from wishing the war would end, Britain wanted it to continue for as long as possible.

> They gave no place to consideration of humanity, of chivalry, of kindred blood. They are governed solely by the cold, callous and calculating policy of self-advantage. Blood and tears may flow in torrents; roofs that cover sleeping women and children may flame from the brand of the incendiary; famine may gnaw at the hearts of the innocent and helpless; the demonized slave may be fired to acts of unmentionable horror -- what cares the great Christian nation of Great Britain for all this! It is in her interest that the terrible work should go on! The speaking of a word might end it all, and because it might she will not speak the word 32

In editorial after editorial the anti-British message was relentlessly restated and, as if to intensify the attacks, the French were elevated to a sublime and, given the French political and military ambitions, absurd level of purity and good intent. Thus, in juxtaposition to Britain's self-interest was placed French virtue:

> The Emperor of the French, whose heart is yet capable of human sensibility, and can be touched as well by sympathy with manly suffering as by admiration for heroic conduct -- who thinks it would be 'a shame to the civilization of the age' to stand idly by, when such inhumanities are going on and when a gallant and proud race, fighting only for what is their own right of birth, have made good in the face of the world their claim to independence -- desires to end the wholesale butchery of human beings, and to receive into the family of nations a people whose manhood has been so nobly asserted.33

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[32] Richmond Whig, 31 July, 1863.

[33] Ibid.

From late summer 1863, for reasons mentioned in the first chapter, newspapers published less copy.[34] This practical situation combined with a lessening interest in foreign intervention as a practicable notion meant greatly fewer references in what remained of the Southern press about foreign involvement in the war. A limp suggestion that France might yet recognise the Confederacy as a part of the Mexican "adventure" was made at the end of 1864 by the Macon Daily Telegraph, one of the few Confederate papers still publishing. But it was a "feeble ray" that started as a rumour and was third-hand by the time it was published by the Telegraph.[35] The Richmond Examiner published what must have been one of the final statements, reprinted in the Mobile Register in March 1865, which stated that Europe as a whole had let down the Confederacy:

> Foreign nations have been without emotion [in] this irrepressible conflict forced upon us, and without intervention have permitted it to be carried on in violation of the usages of civilized warfare for four years. Other nations have been recognised by them upon far less evidence of capacity to maintain their independence than we have exhibited -- nations possessing fewer of the elements of national greatness that we possess -- and yet, to this day, our independence is not recognised.36

Mediation was from time to time seriously considered both by Britain and France and, according to Henry Blumenthal, the Confederate government became increasingly interested as the war

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[34]See pp.10-11.

[35]Macon Daily Telegraph, 28 December, 1864.

[36]Reprinted in Mobile Register, 20 March, 1865.

seemed to drag endlessly on.[37] This interest was not reflected in the press, although it was discussed during the lean period in Confederate fortunes in the spring of 1862. However, the attitudes varied from caution to outright opposition. It was felt to be more a matter for foreign governments to dwell on than for the combatants. The timing was for foreigners to decide, and the rules were theirs also. For the Southerner, mediation implied stalemate which they would not want to admit. It implied compromise, to which the Richmond Whig had "but one answer -- eternal opposition. No compromise, no peace, until every foot of territory south of Mason and Dixon's line is abandoned by the Yankees ...."[38]

The popular feelings about foreign involvement in the war followed three chronological, although necessarily overlapping, stages. The first was a state of high optimism which lasted from the outset of war through the summer of 1861; the second was the search for an explanation as to why there was no involvement, especially recognition, which lasted from the summer of 1861 to about the end of 1862; the final stage was the realisation, taking different forms, that Europe would not get involved.

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[37] Blumenthal, Confederate Diplomacy, pp.158-159.

[38] Richmond Whig, 28 March, 1862; Richmond Examiner, 17 April, 1862.

CHAPTER IV

THE GREAT CONTROLLING CONSIDERATION OF SELF-INTEREST

"King Cotton" was not an inappropriate term for a staple crop that could dominate a culture in the way that cotton did in the South. It was the essence of the political economy. More than this, Southerners believed that cotton supported the economies of the major European nations, especially Britain, and that it was therefore a crucial factor in maintaining social and political stability. The tragic miscalculation was the belief that the power of "King Cotton" could mould international affairs; that, when the chips were down, Europe could be cajoled, bribed or bullied into actively supporting the Confederacy.

This attitude has been criticised, with justification, by historians as "naive", "preposterous", "ludicrous", and so on.[1] Nevertheless, cotton was enormously important to the British economy. As Cullop points out, textiles were England's most important industry, and the South supplied eighty per cent of the cotton needed to sustain it.[2] Furthermore, a glance at the English

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[1] Cullop, Confederate Propaganda, p.135.
Edward Albert Pollard, The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederacy (New York: E.B. Treat & Co., 1867), pp.130-131.

[2] Cullop, p.11.

press of the period will indicate that this attitude was as firmly held by the English as the Southerners. As Owsley said, it was "the English leaders themselves who contributed most to convincing the Southern people that England's very existence seemed to depend upon the cotton of the South.[3] Every Southern newspaper time and again quoted from English papers to indicate that the cotton dearth was cutting deep. In the New Orleans Bee of 22 October 1862 the leader headline was "THE DISTRESS IN ENGLAND", and this opening paragraph was typical of newspaper opinion:

> The latest accounts received from England show that the distress in the cotton districts continue to increase, from week to week. Day after day mills have been shortening the time for which they kept at work; and although not so frequently, yet with consistency, others were closing altogether.

The Southern press quoted freely from a wealth of English papers all of which gave substance to the "King Cotton" philosophy: as one English newspaper claimed, the alternative colonial source of cotton, India, would not help replace American cotton:

> before the cotton of India could be got or the machinery prepared for its manufacture, the probabilities are, that we should have no mills to refit, no operatives to employ, no commerce to sacrifice and no country to save .... Why should they [the English workers] see their wives in rags, their children famished, their cupboard empty, their grates fireless, their homes denuded of every article of furniture, themselves pressed into pauperism or coerced into crime, because the mad mean government of the Northern States has committed itself to one of the most foolish and wicked wars ever waged by one power against another ...?4

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[3]Owsley, p.12.

[4]Quoted in Columbus Weekly Enquirer, 17 January, 1862.

The belief in "King Cotton", well established by the beginning of the war, was unshaken by news of abundant stockpiles of cotton in the warehouses of England's northern ports. In July 1861 the Richmond Whig acknowledged that England had "a large supply of cotton snug and safe in her warehouses":

> But just wait a while, and let these warehouses become empty -- the cotton spun up and sold -- and then, should the Southern ports still be blockaded, we shall see the word 'neutrality' banished from her vocabulary, and the way and means devised for a replenishing of stocks, and the consequent resumption of the mills that may have been temporarily closed.5

The Mobile Register took much the same line during the first summer of the war. They anticipated the day when England and France, and also Spain, Belgium, Russia, Switzerland "and a dozen other countries" would find the "last bale gone."

> The busy hum of [the] factory will cease, its doors be closed and its operatives scattered, knowing not where to find a loaf of bread. Eight or nine millions of people -- white population equal to the whole population of this vast and unconquerable confederacy -- will be turned out in a starving condition, the cries for bread of each man, woman and child of them, a solemn protest of humanity to Heaven against Abraham Lincoln and his compeers .... A short time, and we will learn what really is the power of the cotton lever. We will learn if it has strength to move the world. We will see if the governments of Europe will turn a deaf ear to the appealing cries of starving millions of the foreign subjects of King Cotton .... England, Europe, cannot afford to wait for the Confederacy to conquer a peace. The spindles and the looms are working out the defeat of the North and our independence 6

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[5] Richmond Whig, 9 July, 1861.

[6] Mobile Register, 11 August, 1861.

The basic message and the emotional pitch of the above is typical of publications both in the South and in England. Pollard was certainly right when he wrote with hindsight in 1867 that it was absurd to expect that England would act as if her empire depended on "a single article of trade that was grown in America."[7] But it would be wrong to assume that Southerners were out of step with the received wisdom of the time.

In any event, this implicit, uncritical, and essentially passive trust in "King Cotton" was short lived. As late as the summer of 1863 the Richmond Whig could write: "In spite of all disappointments and doubts, Cotton is King, if we had the nerve and pluck enough to crown and proclaim him such ...."[8] But this became an exception. From the summer of 1861 the press called for action that would support the influence of cotton. Higher prices should be paid for commodities brought through the blockade, a remission should be applied to all duties against imports, a remission also on port and city charges, and Confederate purchase of steamers that were capable of running the blockade. There was growing support for voluntary crop destruction in order "to startle France and England from their apathy"; wherever the enemy has penetrated, claimed the Whig "the cotton has been cheerfully given as a holocaust on the altar of liberty."[9]

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[7]Pollard, The Lost Cause, pp.130-131.

[8]Richmond Whig, 23 June, 1863.

[9]Columbus Daily Enquirer, 29 July, 1861; New Orleans Bee, 13 March, 1862; Ibid., 27 July, 1861; Richmond Whig, 17 June, 1862.

Therefore, during the first six months or so of the war, the Southern press emphasised a fairly simplistic version of the "King Cotton" philosophy: economic ruin for manufacturing and related industries; the pauperisation of massive numbers of operatives and their dependents throughout Europe, and especially England and France; either revolution or, more likely, successful pressure on European governments to open up the cotton supply through some form of intervention. This was not, however, the whole story. Later, when it was clear to all but the most stubborn that Europe was not going to intervene for the sake of a cotton supply, attempts were made to understand more fully the complexity of European interests. Even as early as the autumn of 1861 there developed from the passive confidence in "King Cotton" an equally important strain of thought that questioned its logic. This doubt, and sometimes outright rejection, of "King Cotton" continued to the end of the war, gathering strength as time passed and Confederate fortunes changes.

The Macon Daily Telegraph was the most consistent opponent of the "King Cotton" philosophy and the only paper which never really believed it. In one of its last publications, in March 1865, it wrote an apt epitaph:

> 'No, you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to do it. Cotton is King.' This sounds very absurd now, but how many of us believed all this four years ago--and a thousand kindred fallacies.10

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[10] Macon Daily Telegraph, 22 March, 1865.

As early as 1861, the Macon Daily Telegraph had opposed Confederate reliance on "King Cotton" as a weapon because it acted against the interests of free trade. The chief practical argument against restricting the cultivation of cotton, destroying existing crops, or using cotton as a bargaining weapon was that it would stimulate foreign production of cotton or encourage the development of cotton substitutes. Free trade, on the other hand, would cultivate a "mutuality of interest -- a bond of ... friendship."[11] It would improve greatly the supply of much needed European merchandise since payment for cotton would be in goods rather than the more risky transportation of precious metal. Merchandise and, even more important, food was the top priority. The New Orleans Bee, in October 1861, called on cotton to yield its crown for "those higher claimants to authority -- bread and meat."[12] In February 1862 the Macon Daily Telegraph declared:

> Let us prepare for the struggle. Let the very crows in the field caw in scorn at the folly of the planter who bothers himself about planting cotton this spring. In God's name let us have food cheaper and plentier, or give up the ship .... Will any planter of common sense tell us what the army will do -- what the people are to do unless ten times more corn and meat is raised at home?13

By the beginning of 1862 there was wide disillusionment with "King Cotton". The newspapers, Confederate and European, continued to publish reports on the distress in the cotton districts

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[11] Ibid., 9 October, 1861.

[12] New Orleans Bee, 14 October, 1861.

[13] Macon Daily Telegraph, 15 February, 1862.

of England, the risk of revolution, and governments' inhumanity in the face of the peoples' suffering. But the European governments seemed to be unaffected. Some months earlier the Macon Daily Telegraph noted this: "We regret to see the composure and resignation with which the British public are evidently preparing to accept the loss of Southern cotton ... as an unavoidable misfortune."[14] A new sombre orthodoxy developed during 1863: "We ... have attached entirely too much importance to the influence of the cotton question .... This has proved a serious error."; "One principal ground of miscalculation ... has been the idea that Cotton is King."; "Bitter lessons" have reversed the belief in that "good old tune."; "The silly idea of cotton politicians ... is about to expire even in the brains which could hold but that one idea."[15] In November 1861 the Columbus Daily Enquirer had made the point:

> The great truth is that Commerce has no King, it is a democracy, in which the poorest commodity of today may rise to the highest rank tomorrow .... Until we have such diversity of interests and pursuits that we can establish and maintain a home value for our leading products, they will ever be subject to vicissitudes such as we have witnessed within the last twelve months.16

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[14] Macon Daily Telegraph, 23 October, 1861.

[15] New Orleans Bee, 4 March, 1862; Columbus Daily Telegraph, 25 March, 1862; Mobile Daily Advertiser, 19 April, 1862; Richmond Examiner, 20 August, 1862.

[16] Columbus Daily Telegraph, 7 November, 1861.

The early support for England was not an expression of friendliness. England had the military might to take on the North, and she was thought to be the most vulnerable to "King Cotton" diplomacy. When it became clear that England would not easily be influenced by enticement or threat of cotton diplomacy the Confederate press became openly aggressive. There was not, to begin with, any evidence in the Southern press of the feelings of "admiration and friendliness" which Owsley suggests existed in the South at the beginning of the war.[17] The flavour of the reporting at the start of war supports more Edward Crapol's thesis that "Americans traditionally have distrusted, feared, and disliked England."[18] Therefore, it was easy for the press to let loose feelings of invective against England, especially when Confederate fortunes were low.

The Trent affair, as we have already indicated, was the high point in Confederate expectations of British involvement in the war. When that opportunity passed there were few words of friendliness for England. The Savannah Republic published an article in June 1862 that was reprinted in other papers:

> the true policy of the Confederate States consists of cutting loose, in every practicable way, from British trade, British monopoly, and British bondage; that, in the regulation of our commercial treaties with nations abroad, we should discriminate against enemies and in favour of friends.19

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[17] Owsley, p.489.

[18] Edward Crapol, America for Americans: Economic Nationalism and Anglophobia in the late Nineteenth Century (Westport, Conn., 1973), p.4.

[19] Richmond Whig, 12 June, 1862.

In the Richmond Whig a correspondent who signed himself Rule Slaveownia replied:

> for a third of a century England has, by every appliance of her legislature, her oratory, her pulpit, her press, and her power, exerted herself to the utmost, not only to bring our institutions into disrepute, but to overthrow them entirely -- and further that she has every interest to do so.20

European intervention was by this time no more than a shallow hope. Antietam was to follow, the prospect of mediation had failed, and by the summer of 1863 relations between the British and Confederates were at a very low ebb.[21] The cool and aloof manner of Palmerston's dealings with the Confederate Commissioner, an affirmation of Britain's presumed attitude to the Confederacy, was received as a bitter insult. There was an understandable frustration in the Confederate press. The Columbus Enquirer reacted with a strain of "King Cotton". It suggested that the Confederacy should, if it was possible to do so "without serious injury to herself,"

> transfer to a more friendly power the commercial treasure that has given Great Britain half her prosperity and enabled her to maintain her supremacy on the high seas. Never has a more fit occasion offered to rebuke her heartlessness and perfidy; never a better opportunity to exemplify to the world the power of the resources of these States and the value of their friendship. Let Great Britain, when our hour of triumph comes, have cause to exclaim, in the language of her greatest dramatist:-

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Cullop, p.85.

> Oh, fool! fool! fool!
> I am one whose hand,
> Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away
> Richer than all his tribe.22

The Confederate press searched for the motives to explain why Britain had turned away from what appeared to be her best interests, and assumed instead the stance of "strict neutrality". There were many references to the concepts of honour, humanity, civilisation, right, and selfishness. But underlying these, and many specific and sometimes outlandish notions, was the overwhelming notion of national self-interest. In April 1862 the Richmond Examiner put it this way:

> It is idle to urge consideration of right or justice, against over-ruling motives of interest, real or fancied, present or prospective. The intensely practical character of English people, faithfully mirrored by the Government, never abandons the great object of national aggrandizement. Let them see their way clearly to that goal, and solid reasons enough will be found to support the policy that leads to it.23

Behind the notion of self-interest lay, however, the issue of slavery. This was not often debated in the press although it is to be sensed in the background and brought into focus through sharp references to abolitionist fanatics, sentimental cant, the extremists of Exeter Hall, and so on. In August 1861 the

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[22] Columbus Daily Enquirer, 10 October, 1863.

[23] Richmond Examiner, 20 April, 1863.

Richmond Examiner did, however, print a major editorial on the place of slavery. It was a blend of hurt incredulity and aggression. The whole of the European public "is animated by the most unfriendly sentiment towards the Southern community." Other slaveholding countries, the article claimed, received no such criticism: Russia, Turkey, Spain, Brazil, and Portugal ("the peculiar protege of Abolitionist England"). The answer was the withdrawal of the Confederacy from Europe, as it had already done from the Union:

> Not till we prove ourselves independent of their opinions, above and beyond their help, will we obtain their amity and justice .... We must return disdain for disdain, defiance for calumny, put far from us the fallacy that we have any friend in the world .... On our own swords we must lean, on our own arms we must alone rely for help, till we shall no longer need any other.24

Other articles followed in a number of newspapers, in a similar vein. The strongest was also in the Examiner, in March 1863, which suggested that Britain sought to destroy slavery and, by so doing, destroy also the Union. Britain's attitude to the Civil War was, according to the Examiner, based on her place in world power politics. She already had supremacy in shipping and commerce that was based on "her insular position and vast colonial interests" and was thus secure. Her rich natural resources and cheap labour gave to Britain an advantage in "the mechanical arts and manufactures." The one great interest in which the United

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[24] Richmond Examiner, 7 August, 1861.

States outstripped Britain, and which almost balanced Britain's other advantages, was cotton. Britain's continuing supremacy in the world depended, therefore, on two possible measures: first, the destruction of the cotton culture through the overthrow of the institution of slavery; second, the Fomenting of "sectional agitations" to force a separation of the Union. An attack on the cotton culture, through an implicit support of the North, was chosen because it would achieve both objectives simultaneously. Britain would get her monopoly of the cotton supply by eliminating Southern competition, and the Union would be divided because of the "imbecility of the intellect in which the North allowed itself to be enlisted in the mad work of self-destruction."[25]

The Richmond Whig, in June 1863, got more directly to the point:

> Talk of England's aversion to slavery -- she is averse to it, deeply, bitterly, fanatically -- the leader and stimulator, if you please, of the anti-slavery agitation of the age -- but England is not so averse to anything, not so fixed in any principle, as to let it interfere with what is her interest. Ask any time what is the interest of England ... to discover her policy or understand her conduct.[26]

The British did not need cotton as badly as the Confederate press thought. The economic consequences of the blockade were severe, but not the catastrophe that was envisaged by many on both sides of the Atlantic. The risk of war with the North and the

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25 Ibid., 7 August, 1861.

26 Richmond Whig, 23 June, 1863.

threat this would pose for the massive investment by British capitalists in railways, banking, land speculation and manufacturing was too high when balanced against the prospect of an outright Confederate victory. Also, Britain was fortunate in having a colonial cotton supply, embryonic and inferior in quality to the American, but a support system none the less. And, defence of the Confederacy would be seen as support for slavery. Without enormous advantages to go with it, this would have been politically impossible.

Therefore, the risks were too high and the returns too uncertain for the British to become embroiled in a dreadful conflagration of such magnitude. The Richmond Whig, in July 1862, put the balanced view:

> We have shared in the general sense of wrong and indignation, awakened in this country by the apparent heartlessness of England in the pending struggle. Perhaps we may have judged unreasonably. England is selfish, as what nation is not?27

Cullop suggests that the Richmond government lost patience with Britain and shifted its attention to France by the autumn of 1863.[28] The Confederate press had started to do so by the early months of 1862, and continued to speak of French aid until at least 1864. France offered the advantage over Britain because

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[27]Ibid., 14 July, 1862.

[28]Cullop, p.86.

she offered no apparent threat to slavery. Napoleon was a practical statesman, claimed the Columbus Daily Enquirer, "Whose policy is not biased by hereditary fanaticism or educational prejudice."[29] And France, it could be claimed, had wanted to recognise the Confederacy but had been prevented because of British intransigence. "King Cotton" diplomacy this time offered inducements rather than threats.

> The sagacious man who governs France is not tethered by ... peace societies. He acts from the great interests of his country. He could be readily brought to see the immense advantages which would accrue to France from a close and exclusive commercial alliance with the Southern States.30

In the final months of the Civil War the few papers that survived not surprisingly had little to say for either Britain or France. In January 1865 the Richmond Whig, in true form, damned them both. It predicted with evident glee that with the defeat of the Confederacy would grow an American power greater than any nation in the world. "Napoleon will find that he has finessed too deeply and lost the game," and soon France would not "hold a colony without consent" from the United States. But for Britain was reserved the greatest derision and hatred. She would lose Canada and the West Indies; her fleets would be driven from the oceans; American cruisers "would hang around the coast of Great Britain and

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[29] Columbus Daily Enquirer, 20 February, 1862.

[30] Richmond Whig, 5 February, 1862.

destroy her coasting trade": Ireland and India would go; Australia would be retained only as long as America permitted it. "Are these things dreams?" the Whig asked rhetorically:

> Look at what has been going on here for four years past, and then say what they are. Here is a power that within that time, has increased her navy from thirty ships to six hundred -- that has increased her marine from a few thousand sailors to fifty thousand. Here are two powers engaged in a deadly struggle, each of which has sent forth armies sufficient to have overwhelmed Great Britain and France. These two armies, the most tried and the best fighting in all the earth, will be combined. Recruits enough will be added to make a million men. They hate each other, but they hate England even more. At a signal -- the very slightest -- this whole-force will be let loose upon her ....
> In forty years, the population of the United States would be one hundred million. It would be the strongest nation the world ever beheld. Its influence over the whole world would be unparalleled owing to the weakness and timidity of France and England.31

In a satirical and powerful piece, the Mobile Daily Advertiser glanced back at the European response to "King Cotton". The blockade was set and England and France acquiesced: "Mr Ardent Disposition" had claimed that when the cotton was spun and the stockpiles exhausted things would be different:

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[31] Richmond Whig, 20 January, 1865.

Let Manchester exhaust her stock; let her operatives fail to obtain employment, and begin to starve; and let it be seen that no raw material is forthcoming and that cotton-planting has ceased -- then the listless old Lion will begin to growl and ruffle his mane, and, mayhap, lash his sides with his tail and rouse the nations by his mighty roar. But, one after another factory stopped -- others ran on half or quarter time -- operatives began to starve sure enough, and a mighty cry of distress went up from the masses. 'Abe!' says A.D., 'its' coming -- stand from under.' But to the disappointment of the said A.D., and all other ardent and expectant dreamers among us, the drowsy, lazy, self-interested old king of beasts, without raising his sleepy muzzle from his folded paws, simply opened one eye and said -- 'FEED EM!'
And immediately 'Old England' became one great poor house, while sharp nosed Brother Jonathan allowed his potato trap to expand into a significant grin, and keen-sighted Southerners could just discern a gentle swaying of the digits of his right hand, while the thumb rested lightly upon the sharp pointed nasal protuberance; and thus burst the bubble of raising the blockade to secure a supply of cotton. The roar which was to blow Uncle Sam sky-high by its mighty concussions, simmered down to a never explained inaction, and the mane which was to be rumpled so belligerently remained in quiet placidity. In short, England kept out of the war with all her might and mane, and thus the mainstay of the rebellion failed to respond to our 'great expectations.'

As for the Gallic cock, he flapped his wings once or twice, but when he essayed to crow his voice failed him. For no sooner had he stretched forth his neck for the effort, flapping his wings close to the sleepy forest-monarch's nose, in order to attract his attention and obtain his assistance, then seeing the ruffled feathers on the American Eagles outstretched neck, and casting a slight glance from his flashing eye, then all sound and fury died away.32

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[32] Mobile Daily Advertiser, 10 June, 1865.

The Southern newspaper press was committed to European intervention in some form, and the expectation or hope that this would happen was the thread that ran through wartime editorial comment.

The movement from expectation or hope, to certainty and to despair, reflected the unhealthy reliance that the South placed on European, and especially British, support for the Confederate cause. This reliance at times seemed to shift responsibility from the Confederacy to Europe. Recognition by Britain of the sovereignty of the Southern States initially was expected as of right; the possibility that Britain might do otherwise seemed inconceivable. The blockade was to be broken with scant regard for the consequences to Britain. The Trent affair was welcomed by the South because of the possibility that Britain would enter the war not so much as an ally of the Confederacy but as a direct antagonist of the North. In these matters the Confederacy had a passive role as far as the press seemed to suggest. The most favourable outcome, it often seemed, would be that Britain made war with the North thereby debilitating or defeating the enemy on the South's behalf. Implicit in this attitude was a kind of fatalism that helps explain the frantic way that attention passed from Britain to France as friend and potential protector and the violence of the eventual denunciation of Britain.

But interwoven with this fatalism and the supporting rhetoric which espoused notions of brotherhood, kindred spirits, the mother-country and so on, was a realism that recognised national

self-interest as the ultimate influence in international affairs. "King Cotton" was after all the starkest manifestation of that. The newspapers advocated both directly and indirectly, and without qualm or introspection, the naked use of the presumed power of cotton in the interests of the South. This of course was to prove a miscalculation. The crude aggression and the enticement which underpinned the newspapers' support for cotton diplomacy did not work. For the British the awful consequences of involvement in the war were unthinkable given the very high risks balanced against probable gains. In international diplomacy there are no unselfish acts; all the South could really hope for was that their interests and those of England or, failing that, France, would coincide. Thus, all nations are selfish and, as the Richmond Whig so aptly expressed it, "The selfishness of nations is patriotism."[33]

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[33]Richmond Whig, 14 July, 1862.

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